

**Testimony Before the Environment, Technology, and Standards
Subcommittee of the House of Representatives' Committee on Science
Regarding "Transportation Research and Development Needs In the
Denver Region"**

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Guillermo V. Vidal, I serve as a member of the Cabinet of Mayor John Hickenlooper in the role of Manager of Denver Public Works for the City and County of Denver. I am extremely honored and privileged to be invited to testify in front of you today regarding this very relevant topic.

I believe I present a very unique perspective because of the various roles I have served in throughout my career. I have seen these issues from the State level as the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Transportation, as the Executive Director of the Denver Regional

Council of Governments (the local Metropolitan Planning Organization), and now under my current role with the City of Denver. Although there has been substantial investment in highway infrastructure and traffic management technologies, we are still having troubles recognizing the unique problems of the urbanized areas and therefore congestion and traffic delays continue to worsen. I believe the reason for this has to do with the differing agendas and goals of the various organizations that are involved in planning and funding transportation projects. The DOT is usually focused on maintaining the existing highway infrastructure. However, in dealing with congestion, they focus on the motorists' ability to go from point "A" to point "B" on the particular corridor as fast as they legally can. Although this vision may be an excellent one for traffic operations, it does not balance well with the land use decisions or the use of transit that is so imperative for healthy metropolitan areas.

Next to the DOTs are the transit agencies whose agenda is focused around the operations and development of transit. Although this agenda is more supportive of the regional and local land use plans, it is

often viewed as a competing agenda to that of highways. This agency in Denver is the Regional Transit District (RTD).

Following is the agenda of the MPOs who normally try to view transportation for the region for consistent connectivity as well as multi-modal. In Denver, DRCOG, in partnership with their member governments, created Metro Vision. This is a twenty year vision for the region that tries to incorporate and integrate transportation and land use planning. I believe this is the right way to look at transportation planning, unfortunately the MPOs have little authority in implementing these plans, leaving any certainty of implementing long range plans strictly up the voluntary efforts of each individual jurisdiction or state agency.

Last but not least is the agenda of the cities and counties. Although they value mobility and congestion relief, they do not feel the motorist on the corridor have a greater right than their citizens who live along side of those corridors. This means they will support transportation decisions that do not sacrifice the quality of life of their neighborhoods or destroy their businesses. They also tend to favor those solutions that

help economic development. This translates into support for decisions that will allow people to easily get and stay in their communities rather than just drive through them.

Where all this breaks down is that little exists in the process that allows either the MPOs or the communities themselves to truly influence the selection of projects or alternatives on their various corridors or communities. Although there is the NEPA process to determine alternative selection, the implementing agency can influence the decision of the selected alternative by limiting the budget tied to the project. Additionally, on the project selection process, the MPOs and the local governments only provide input to the process, leaving the decision making process entirely in the hands of the implementing agency. The final result is that the agenda of the implementing agency ends up ruling the day since they have unilateral control of most of the funds.

In Colorado, the unfortunate situation the Denver Region finds itself in is that the CDOT has given priority to maintenance of the entire state system over relieving congestion in the urban areas. This means that most of the dollars end up fixing the large inventory of miles which tend

to be in the rural areas, while the urban areas are left to solve their congestion problems by either taxing themselves regionally or tolling. Both of these add a greater burden of the transportation costs to urban area citizens.

The areas that I would recommend be investigated to improve planning and evaluation tools are the following:

- 1) Establish congestion performance measures that can help articulate goals to be achieved by the DOTs as well as to define the problem. This would be similar to a pavement or bridge management system that are being used to establish maintenance goals as well as funding levels by the DOTs. We need similar goals and funding levels to be established for congestion relief.**
- 2) Establish transportation measures that reflect the movement of people and goods as opposed to only the movement of cars and trucks. Although the movement of cars and trucks is important, we need to remember that this is only one method of moving people and goods. Unfortunately, we are stuck with using traffic measures such as Average Daily Traffic (ADT) as the only**

congestion measure therefore, our solutions tend to be highway oriented in order to address this car congestion.

- 3) Develop methods to integrate transit and highway planning. We need to stop making these modes compete with each other and begin to treat them as necessary solutions to urban area problems.**
- 4) Establish methods that integrate transportation planning and land use planning. In order to do this we need to first of all understand what kind of land use is promoted by each kind of transportation solution so that we can determine the pros and cons of each one. Ultimately, neither planning can be done in a vacuum.**
- 5) Develop methods that truly enable joint resource allocation between the DOTs and MPOs/local governments. Although everyone recognizes that maintenance of the system is important, good balance needs to be maintained between maintenance, safety and congestion relief. In order to assure this balance, contribution to the funding needs to be considered as part of the resource allocation factors. This is similar to the “Minimum Guarantee” that is established in the Federal Transportation**

Legislation TEA-21. In other words, in order to be more directly responsive to the people who contribute to the funding as opposed to being only responsive to the number of lane miles, resource allocation processes should be established to weigh into any formula the contribution to the funding stream by the citizens of an identified planning region.

- 6) Not all miles of the state highway system should be considered equal. Different maintenance standards should be investigated to be established on different kind of roads. Heavily congested roads should have different priority and maintenance standards than lower congested roads. Farm to market roads should have a different standard than low volume rural roads. Truck routes a different standard than non truck routes. The bottom line is that even if maintenance is considered more important than congestion relief, perhaps this decision can be limited to only the maintenance of key roads as opposed to the maintenance of all roads.**

Unfortunately, the cities, counties and MPO have very little role in the research agenda for the Colorado DOT or even at the federal level.

Although we may be provided input, the ultimate choice is the DOTs. Additionally, both the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) cater to their main clients, the DOTs and the transit agencies thereby ignoring the needs of the MPO and the local governments. I can relate that while working for DRCOG, I got little response or attention from the federal agencies to those issues we wanted investigated or researched. In fact most of our requests were usually run by the CDOT and RTD for their support or approval. If these implementing agencies did not agree, usually our requests were denied. Where MPOs and local governments have been effective in research and development needs is in the application for specific grants. These tend to be very specific to a particular project or method to be explored and may not necessarily have broad policy implications.

I believe the investment made on research for improved materials and in traffic management tools has been a good investment and should continue. It is important however, to expand the thinking into researching strategies that would encourage people to change their travel patterns and choices at least during the peak hours. I also believe

it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies that are being used and/or proposed as congestion relief measures to ensure whether or not they are truly being effective. I offer the following areas for consideration for further research.

1) Establishing best practices, incentives or strategies that encourage people to use alternative modes of transportation during the peak traffic periods.

2) Establishing incentives for businesses to encourage their employees to change their traveling patterns during peak periods. In other words, what needs to be done to encourage businesses to implement tele-working, flexible work hours, carpooling, providing transit passes, etc.

3) Establishing measurable standards for Traffic Demand Management (TDM) strategies and incorporating them into the Regional Transportation Plan.

4) Establishing and determining best practices for dealing with freight movement in the metropolitan areas. Actions such as not allowing trucks during peak periods, exclusive truck lanes, truck bypasses should be evaluated for effectiveness.

5) Serious evaluation should be done to determine the success of toll roads and hot lanes that have been established since the passage of

ISETEA. These are being proposed as the main strategies to deal with congestion in the Denver metro area and it is impossible to determine if these would be successful strategies. Investigation should be made to determine are the facilities successful. Questions such as, are they generating enough revenue to make them worthwhile? Are they even breaking even financially? Are they relieving congestion on the corridors they were meant to address?

I hope I have provided useful and helpful suggestions for your consideration. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Subcommittee and I thank you for your time.